

The logo for ARTICLE 19, featuring the text 'ARTICLE 19' in red on a white, torn-paper-like background.

**ARTICLE 19**

EUROPE

# **Protecting journalists in the Netherlands**

Learnings from PersVeilig (Press Safety)

Media Freedom Rapid Response

2023

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This Directory is part of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) project, which tracks, monitors, and responds to violations of press and media freedom in EU member States and candidate countries. This project provides legal and practical support, public advocacy, and information to protect journalists and media workers. The MFRR is organised by a consortium led by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, including ARTICLE 19 Europe, the European Federation of Journalists, Free Press Unlimited, the Institute for Applied Informatics at the University of Leipzig, International Press Institute, and CCI/Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT). The project is co-funded by the European Commission. For more information, see [www.mfrr.eu](http://www.mfrr.eu).



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# Protecting journalists in the Netherlands

Learnings from PersVeilig (Press Safety)

# 1. Introduction

In 2022, as part of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) project, ARTICLE 19 Europe published the *Directory of initiatives on the safety of journalists in Europe*, followed by an [updated second edition](#) in October 2023. For the first time, the Directory brings together information about initiatives on the safety of journalists deployed by the state, or in which the state is involved, in the countries covered by the MFRR – for the benefit of journalists, civil society, and policymakers across Europe.

Initiatives like these are crucial to enhancing journalists' safety and fighting widespread impunity for crimes against them – yet it is not always clear how they were created, how they operate, or how to set one up. We therefore decided to dive into two of the initiatives listed in our Directory more deeply:

- **PersVeilig (Press Safety) in The Netherlands**, which is the focus of this report; and
- **Stalna radna grupa za bezbednost novinara (Standing Working Group for the Safety of Journalists) in Serbia**, which is the focus of a [separate report](#).

The objectives of these reports are threefold:

1. To shed light on how initiatives to enhance the safety of journalists in two very different country contexts were established;
2. To explore how these initiatives operate, including the successes they have achieved and the challenges they face; and
3. To identify lessons that states, advocates, and the media community across Europe can use to create their own in-country initiatives.

Based on interviews with key stakeholders and additional desk research, this report begins with an overview of the **country context** for journalists' safety in the Netherlands.

We then move on to explore how **PersVeilig** was created, who is involved, what it does, and the successes and challenges it faces.

Finally, we offer **lessons learned** from PersVeilig's experience for the media community, advocates, and state actors across Europe to consider when setting up safety initiatives in their own countries. Most of these lessons were directly proposed by the people we interviewed for this report:

- Guusje Somer (Policy and Advocacy Officer, Free Press Unlimited)
- Peter ter Velde (Project Manager, PersVeilig)
- Senior figure in a media-focused civil society organisation<sup>1</sup>

ARTICLE 19, MFRR, and the authors of this report are deeply grateful for their contributions.

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<sup>1</sup> This person chose to remain anonymous.

## 2. Country context: The Netherlands

In ARTICLE 19's [Global Expression Report 2023](#) (an annual look at the right to free expression and information across the world), the Netherlands is ranked 24th out of 161 countries, with an Expression Score of 85 out of 100. Often perceived as a beacon of media freedom, and [characterised](#) by a high level of media independence, the country comes in at 6th place in Reporters Without Borders' [World Index](#). It is a member of [the Media Freedom Coalition](#): a partnership of countries that have committed to working together to promote media freedom at home and abroad.

*'despite its positive reputation and formal guarantees of media independence, the safety of journalists in the Netherlands has become a concern'*

Yet despite its positive reputation and formal guarantees of media independence, the safety of journalists in the Netherlands has become a concern. A [study](#) by the Erasmus School of Law, commissioned by the Dutch government and published in February 2023, explores the nature and impact of violence against journalists in the country and identifies four trends:

1. Assaults against camera(wo)men and photojournalists, often perpetrated by people who do not want to be recorded in public;
2. Abuse when reporting from protests and demonstrations, particularly during protests against Covid-19 restrictions and the 2023 [farmers' protests](#);

3. Harassment, abuse, and threats on social media ([research](#) commissioned by PersVeilig in 2022 found that 82% of 292 women journalists had experienced some form of digital violence); and
4. Intimidation against investigative journalists, which is often more extreme and tends to be perpetrated by those who are the focus of the media coverage.

These safety concerns were also noted in the [report](#) of the MFRR's mission to the Netherlands in February 2022, which revealed three key problems in the country (among others):

1. A hostile environment for journalists, linked to increased polarisation of society;
2. Threats against journalists who investigate organised crime (also noted in the Committee for the Protection of Journalists' 2023 [mission report](#)); and
3. Decreasing public trust – especially on the local level – in the media and journalists, which is related to increased media concentration and reduced media pluralism.

The [Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists](#) (managed by the Council of Europe in cooperation with partner organisations, including ARTICLE 19), which reports on serious threats to the safety of journalists and media freedom in Europe, published [5 alerts](#) for the Netherlands in 2022; currently, there are [2 active alerts](#). The MFRR monitoring platform recorded [15 threats](#) in 2022 and [3](#) so far (as of September) in 2023.

*'in 2022, there were 198 alerts for harassment, intimidation, and violence against journalists'*



PersVeilig's own [monitoring data](#) shows that, in 2022, there were 198 alerts for harassment, intimidation, and violence against journalists. According to Peter ter Velde (Project Manager of PersVeilig) – and backed up by [recent research](#) – journalists are still reluctant to report these cases, so recorded numbers might be just the tip of the iceberg. The majority of reports made to PersVeilig are from freelance journalists, camera(wo)men, and photographers, all of whom primarily experience physical and verbal harassment, and from women journalists, who face significantly elevated levels of online harassment.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The discrepancy between the statistics in these two paragraphs is due to differences in the methodologies used by the organisations recording threats and attacks against journalists.

## 3. PersVeilig (Press Safety)

### Foundations, members, and structure

In 2017, [research](#) commissioned by [Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten](#) (The Dutch Journalists' Association, NVJ) revealed the magnitude of threats against journalists in the Netherlands. Subsequently, the government prioritised setting up initiatives to address these harms, one of which was [PersVeilig](#) (Press Safety). Established in 2019 (initially as a pilot project), PersVeilig acts as a liaison platform and engages with key state authorities – primarily law enforcement and the prosecution – alongside the media community to efficiently and adequately address safety threats.

In line with recommendations by the [EU](#) (2021) and the [Council of Europe](#) (2016) on the safety of journalists, which encourage state actors to engage in coordinated efforts with non-state actors to protect journalists, the Ministry of Culture financially supports PersVeilig. Its founding members were NVJ (within which the project is embedded), Nederlands Genootschap van Hoofdredacteurs (Netherlands Society of Chief Editors), the police, and Openbaar Ministerie (Public Prosecution Service). These members also make up PersVeilig's Steering Committee, which has a strategic and consultative role. The Committee meets monthly, and all members regularly attend every meeting to ensure participatory dialogue.

At the time of writing (November 2023), PersVeilig has only one full-time staff member: Peter ter Velde (Project Manager). NVJ provides him with office space and internal resources (such as financial processing and external communication services), and academic and media actors across the Netherlands also provide support (such as research and co-delivering training).

#### Defining roles and responsibilities

In 2019, the Steering Committee adopted a [Press Safety Protocol](#) to establish PersVeilig's roles and the responsibilities of all parties involved in enhancing journalists' safety: journalists, their employers, the police, and the Public Prosecutor.

*'the Press Safety Protocol is not just a paper commitment: the parties involved implement most of its commitments and responsibilities in practice'*

According to Peter ter Velde, the Press Safety Protocol is not just a paper commitment: the parties involved implement most of its commitments and responsibilities in practice – though [there is always room for improvement](#), especially when it comes to the police's treatment of journalists and raising awareness of PersVeilig among junior police officers.

#### **Employers**

While protecting journalists is the state's obligation under international human rights law, the Press Safety Protocol highlights the responsibility of employers for ensuring their safety. The Protocol states that journalists' employers should allow sufficient time to prepare for and increase their knowledge of safety threats, ensure a high level of safety both within and outside the newsroom, and allocate a budget for training their staff on staying safe while reporting. In cases of violence against journalists, the Protocol states that employers are responsible for providing support and psychosocial assistance; that, if the journalist wishes, employers can file charges on their employee's behalf; and that, as an additional layer of protection, the media outlet's address (rather than the journalist's home address) can be provided to the police and used in criminal charges.

In addition, the media sector has signed up to a 'Collective Norm', which defines a range of threats against journalists that require action from employers – and which is legally binding for all the relevant journalists' associations and their employers. The police and

Public Prosecutor support this norm, and the PersVeilig parties agree to notify PersVeilig of violations against journalists.

#### **Journalists**

Journalists employed by media outlets are required to report threats directly to their employer, but they are also encouraged to report the incident to PersVeilig for monitoring purposes. Freelance journalists can file a report directly to the police, with the support of PersVeilig. However, if immediate assistance or clarification is required, PersVeilig will directly contact the police and the office of the Public Prosecutor and liaise with all the actors (while maintaining its advisory and supporting role). Peter ter Velde told us that, from January–August 2023, two-thirds of all cases reported to PersVeilig were from freelance journalists.

*'from January–August 2023, two-thirds of all cases reported to PersVeilig were from freelance journalists'*

#### **Police**

The Protocol states that 'journalists have been given a preferential position with the police' – a similar position granted to public service employees. In practice, this preferential designation means that 'the police and the Public Prosecution Office ... give high priority to the investigation and prosecution of the suspects of aggression and violence against journalists'.

*'the police and the Public Prosecution Office ... give high priority to the investigation and prosecution of the suspects of aggression and violence against journalists'*

The Protocol sets out the responsibilities of the police when it comes to investigating reported cases: among other commitments, they must investigate with urgency immediately after receiving the report, send the prepared file to the Public Prosecutor as soon as possible, maintain a register of cases, and ensure the media outlet and journalists are sufficiently informed throughout the investigation phase. In cases when a journalist experiences abuse in their private life (e.g. assaults against family members or damage to their home), the police must advise the employer and journalist about suitable safety measures.

#### **Public Prosecutors**

Finally, the Protocol defines the role of the Public Prosecutors, noting that they will treat reported cases with urgency and ensure they are given high priority. In the cases of serious violence, the case can be brought to the court through an expedited process. In all of these situations, the Public Prosecutors will consistently share information with the journalist and their employer and will ensure that all cases are properly recorded and monitored. The Public Prosecutors have also committed to increasing sanctions for crimes against journalists by 200% (though [the majority of media actors do not view these increased sanctions as particularly beneficial](#); they would rather see existing measures being put into practice and the community service ban lifted).

#### **How PersVeilig protects journalists in the Netherlands**

In addition to acting as a liaison point between journalists, the media sector, the police, and the Public Prosecutor, PersVeilig's everyday work consists of four key strands:

- research and monitoring;
- safety training;
- support for journalists following violence and abuse; and
- enhancing journalists' safety online.

These are explored in further detail below.

#### **Research and monitoring**

PersVeilig commissions research to survey the safety landscape and assess the needs of journalists in the Netherlands. In 2022, for example, it commissioned a [survey of women journalists](#), which revealed the scale of harassment and digital threats against them. This research is used to inform practice: based on the findings of this survey, plans are afoot to expand the PersVeilig team and gender-mainstream existing services to better respond to women journalists' needs.<sup>3</sup> This also reflects similar recommendations from the MFRR's 2022 [mission](#) to the Netherlands, which noted the need for a gender-sensitive approach.

*'plans are afoot to expand the PersVeilig team and gender-mainstream existing services to better respond to women journalists' needs'*

PersVeilig also monitors and records reported safety threats against journalists – and is the only actor in the Netherlands to do so (although the Public Prosecutor records cases of violence and resulting proceedings). This data is often discussed at the Steering Committee's monthly meetings to ensure PersVeilig's work is evidence-based. According to a senior figure in a media-focused civil society organisation, this data is an essential resource for media outlets, editors, and the police: it enables them to understand the overall safety landscape, trends, and harms, and to devise adequate services and responses.

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<sup>3</sup> This is particularly important given that data on assaults against journalists is not gender-disaggregated, resulting in [little to no understanding](#) of online gender-based violence and gendered disinformation against women journalists.

## Training

PersVeilig delivers free training sessions for journalists across the Netherlands on a regular basis (on average twice a week, depending on need). These sessions are practical and hands-on, providing tools and strategies to enhance journalists' safety in various settings – from protests to social media. To date, [nearly 750 journalists and 1,500 journalism students](#) have attended these sessions.

*'Nearly 750 journalists and 1,500 journalism students have attended PersVeilig's safety training'*

PersVeilig also trains media outlets and editors on how to establish a safety protocol in the newsroom and other methods of creating a culture of safety, and provides training to freelance journalists.

## Support for journalists following violence and abuse

PersVeilig provides direct support to journalists in the aftermath of violence and abuse, including supplying freelance journalists with a wide range of tools to enhance their digital and physical safety (e.g. safety buttons and surveillance systems).

*'A woman journalist called the hotline following harassment that had forced her to flee her home. The project manager ensured she received mental health support, which enabled her to return home'*

PersVeilig also operates a 24/7 hotline. In January 2023, for example, a woman journalist called the hotline following harassment that had forced her to flee her home. The project manager ensured she received mental health support, which enabled her to return home.

When a journalist reports violence via the hotline, PersVeilig advises them to file a complaint directly with the police (who, as noted, must then urgently address it). To make this reporting as smooth and effective as possible, PersVeilig – in collaboration with law enforcement – has established contact points in all police units throughout the Netherlands, with whom PersVeilig has direct communication channels. In one recent example, a police officer told a journalist who wanted to file a report to do so two weeks later, when they would be less busy. The journalist informed Peter ter Velde, who informed the police contact point. The journalist was then able to file a complaint that very day. In general, however, our interviewees informed us that the police take safety threats seriously.

In its 2022 mission to the Netherlands, the MFRR [found](#) that the relationship between media actors and the police is constantly changing, and that law enforcement lacks the resources to ensure the police are properly trained on media freedom and journalists' safety. For this reason, PersVeilig's project manager – in line with the Press Safety Protocol – assesses every threat individually. Based on this assessment, PersVeilig decides whether and how they will react. In some instances, the police may be fully engaged in providing safety measures; in others (such as protests or riots), there may be a delay. PersVeilig staff must therefore evaluate each incident, taking into consideration that an optimal safety approach is one tailored to the needs of journalists, police capacities, and the overall context of the case. This level of analysis and risk assessment is at the core of PersVeilig's functionality.

*'PersVeilig resolved a case that had been pending for nine months, and the Public Prosecutor visited the journalist to apologise for the delay'*



In 2022, PersVeilig only had to intervene twice with a contact point at the Public Prosecutor's Office (who is also a member of the Steering Committee). On one of these occasions, PersVeilig resolved a case that had been pending for nine months, and the Public Prosecutor visited the journalist to apologise for the delay.

#### **Enhancing journalists' safety online**

PersVeilig has developed an initiative called a 'Stop Conversation'. Used in cases of online harassment, this involves police officers visiting the home of alleged perpetrators to inquire about their online activities and ['confront them about the real-world effect of their online behaviour'](#). PersVeilig's project manager informed us that this intervention has had positive results: in most cases, the harassment stopped after the police intervened. Furthermore, journalists can still file charges and request police protection after a Stop Conversation.

Cooperation with social media companies is of pivotal importance to reducing online harassment and threats; however, despite numerous efforts, PersVeilig has not been able to establish a structured protocol for cooperation with Big Tech companies. Meta seems to be more responsive and willing to assist than Twitter, sometimes taking down abusive content at very short notice – as when an unknown perpetrator(s) [attacked](#) journalist Willem Groeneveld with Molotov cocktails at his home in Groningen.

#### **Successes and challenges**

Below, we highlight key successes that PersVeilig has achieved and how it has achieved them, as well as challenges that it continues to face.

##### **Successes**

The success of PersVeilig has been recognised internationally, and it has served as a model for safety initiatives in Europe, including in [Belgium](#) and [Slovakia](#). On a national

level, Guusje Somer (Free Press Unlimited) told us, PersVeilig has increased politicians' awareness of the need to improve journalists' safety – including [a parliamentary debate](#) on the subject. There has also been an increase in media coverage of threats and violence against journalists, which researchers have [linked](#) to the work of PersVeilig and NVJ.

Research has found that journalists are '[generally satisfied](#)' with PersVeilig's multi-pronged approach, suite of services, and ability to respond quickly to journalists in need. These relationships, built on a foundation of mutual trust and support, are key to the initiative's overall success.

From PersVeilig's perspective, direct contact with journalists – a one-to-one approach – is an effective way of helping journalists in the aftermath of assaults, as it allows for an initial rapid response that is not tied to cumbersome and time-consuming administrative procedures. In the words of PersVeilig's project manager, the success of any initiative to protect journalists depends on every actor responsible – from a hotline adviser to the Public Prosecutor – asking themselves one key question: **How can I help?** In other words, all individuals involved in a safety mechanism must consider what resources they can offer to improve the safety of every journalist who seeks their assistance.

*'The success of any initiative depends on every actor responsible asking themselves: **How can I help?**'*

### Challenges

The challenges that PersVeilig faces, such as a [lack of strategic forms of prevention work](#), can largely be attributed to its limited human resources: the platform has only one full-time staff member (the project manager). This reliance on a single implementer rather than a sustainable safety infrastructure is a serious concern for the future of PersVeilig. A practical solution to bolster its sustainability could be to restructure from a project-based

platform to a more permanent entity, including expanding the team, while maintaining its efficiency. Persveilig's structure has remained the same since it was launched as a pilot project, but it is no longer a pilot project – it is a respected and well-established national initiative that delivers multiple essential services – and it should be structured, expanded, and resourced accordingly.

A further concern regarding PersVeilig's sustainability relates to its collaboration with partners – especially law enforcement, who also consistently lack resources (especially human resources). There are concerns among both PersVeilig and journalists that, in the future, this will make it more difficult for PersVeilig to escalate cases to law enforcement, and for law enforcement to respond rapidly.

Finally, the changing nature of threats against journalists in the Netherlands requires constant adaptation, and both PersVeilig and the media sector more broadly (both within and outside the Netherlands) face external challenges, such as [polarisation and a decline in trust in journalists](#) among some demographics – including politicians.

## 4. Key lessons learned

This final section offers lessons from PersVeilig, with a view to assisting the media community, advocates, and state actors across Europe who may wish to establish safety initiatives in their own countries. Most of these lessons were suggested by our expert interviewees, to whom we are deeply grateful.

However, as PersVeilig's project manager told us, caution must be exercised when attempting to replicate practices and mechanisms from other countries. Context – social, political, legislative, institutional – can differ greatly from place to place, and safety initiatives must reflect country-specific needs and capacities.

- 1. Symbolic value:** While its functional value is the essence, a safety initiative also holds symbolic value. It sends a clear signal to all of society – particularly those who target journalists – that the state will not tolerate violence against media actors. At the same time, it sends a clear signal to journalists that violence should not be normalised as 'just part of the job', and that there is a system in place that will support them.
- 2. Multi-stakeholder process:** The creation, implementation, and development of a protection mechanism should include all relevant stakeholders – including media and journalists' representatives, media freedom civil society organisations, and academia – and ensure participatory processes. This will ensure all parties agree, and take ownership over, its goals and functions.
- 3. Inclusive, accessible, barrier-free support:** The support and services that the initiative provides should be hands-on, easy to access, unencumbered by unnecessary administrative burdens, and equally accessible to all journalists – regardless of gender, sexual identity, race, age, disability, etc.

4. **An intersectional feminist approach:** From its inception and throughout all of its activities, any safety initiative must consistently and meaningfully engage with women journalists in all their diversity (taking into account intersecting forms of discrimination such as sexual orientation, age, race, religion, class, etc.). An intersectional gender approach enables the initiative's members, and consequently the broader media community and state authorities, to deepen their understanding of the interplay between sociopolitical factors and the specific risks that women journalists are exposed to. This is an important first step towards a [feminist approach to the safety of journalists](#).
5. **Mutual trust:** The functionality of safety initiatives often requires the involvement of various state and non-state actors that may not have previously collaborated, and who may therefore lack mutual trust. These considerations must be addressed at the very beginning of the design stage through a participatory process. Simply put, mutual trust is the most salient requirement for any successful safety mechanism.

*'mutual trust is the most salient requirement for any successful safety mechanism'*

6. **Transparency:** Any mechanism to protect journalists should have a website featuring information about its services to ensure its activities are transparent and easily accessible – especially to those who most need their support.
7. **Local relevance:** Any safety initiative must be designed with local contexts and culture in mind so that it can effectively and appropriately address local journalists' needs and respond to the specific threats and harms they face.
8. **Maximising results:** Coordinators and members of the safety initiative should be well-known and trusted in the media community. Partner organisations should be

represented by high-level senior management to ensure proper implementation of activities, maximising the likelihood of tangible results.

- 9. Funding:** PersVeilig is delivering an impressive array of vital services, especially considering that it only has one full-time staff member. However, its lack of resources – human and financial – is a significant concern for its sustainability. Safety initiatives should be adequately resourced to avoid staff burnout, increase their efficacy, and ensure they can continue to deliver their vital work in the long term. The budget should be provided by the most appropriate state entity.
- 10. Regular review:** Initiative-led activities should be periodically reviewed in collaboration with journalists to encourage maximum trust and shared ownership. At the same time, services and safety protocols for the mechanism’s members should be regularly reviewed and adapted to respond to the ever-changing threats against journalists.

*‘Activities should be reviewed in collaboration with journalists to encourage shared ownership’*

- 11. State and non-state collaboration:** It is unreasonable to expect one single initiative to bear sole responsibility for the safety of journalists. A safety mechanism should be only one among many measures to address the plethora of safety challenges that journalists face, including legislation and public policies. Educating and raising awareness of the role of the media in democratic societies must be a shared endeavour between state and non-state actors.
- 12. SMART goals:** Safety initiatives need to develop strategies and work plans that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) through a participatory and transparent process. This will also ensure these mechanisms can be held accountable.

#### 4. Key lessons learned

